

April 2005

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (2005) "ATG Interviews Troy Williams," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4799>

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ATG Interviews Troy Williams

President and CEO, Questia

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

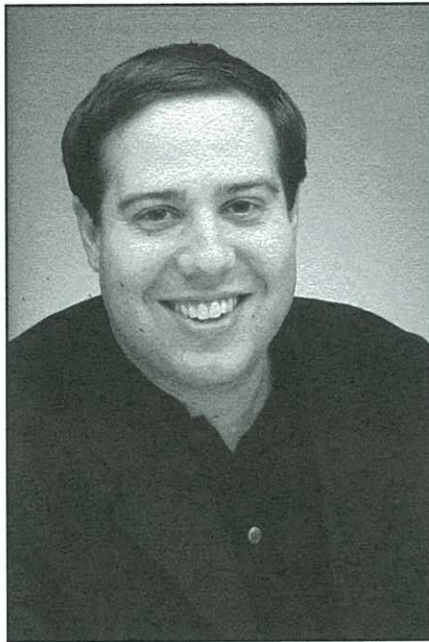
*Please Note: We interviewed Troy five years ago, in the November 2000 issue of **Against the Grain** (v.12#5, November 2000, p.50, interview by Judy Luther). Lots has happened in the marketplace since then. — KS*

ATG: When we last interviewed you, Questia was just getting started. How has Questia changed from November 2000 to April 2005?

First, let me start with what hasn't changed. Unlike most other electronic book initiatives that launched in the late 1990's, which have morphed repeatedly, **Questia** continues to build and market the same product that we set out to build in 1998: we're selling an online database of books to individuals with tools that greatly simplify the research paper writing process. In that sense, not much has changed. I attribute this to the fact that we had a great idea and did a lot of market research early on. It's clear that we were way ahead of our time and the underlying product and the market we have been pursuing were right on.

What has changed is that the company has matured a great deal. In November 2000, we were still in the final stages of building the **Questia** online library and research service. We didn't actually launch it until January 2001. Due to the dot-com crash and September 11th tragedy, we were prevented from raising the additional capital required to pursue the original go-to-market strategy. Thus, the timescale of the project changed. We always knew it was going to take a long time to build our online library just as it does with any physical library. But, given the changes in the marketplace, in 2001 we stopped adding books to the library and focused simply on marketing the collection we had already built. We didn't start adding titles to the library again until late 2003.

Through much hard work and the dedication of the **Questia** team, we have made steady progress over the past three years. We achieved a cash flow positive position in June 2003. **Questia** attracts over 3 million unique visitors to its Website each month. Our subscriber base is growing steadily; we have paying subscribers in over 195 countries today. And, we are growing the library quite aggressively again. In the past two months, we have signed major licensing deals with **Cambridge University Press**, **Taylor & Francis** and **John Wiley & Sons**. In the past six months alone, we have added over 8,000 books and half a million articles to our library. Our collection of academically vetted, peer reviewed books and articles is now over 56,000 books and nearly one million articles and growing. Finally, in the past year, we have more than



doubled the number of **Questia** employees to more than 65. So, we have a lot of momentum and are quite sanguine about what the next few years hold for us.

ATG: There are many more competitors in the eBook market these days (at the time, the only competitors mentioned were ebrary and netlibrary) and netlibrary has been sold to OCLC after an unsuccessful start up. How do you see the eBook landscape right now? And in the future? What are your predictions?

I was never a big proponent of the eBook market and still am not. I remember back in 2000, then — **Andersen Consulting** (now **Accenture**) did a study for the **American Association of Publishers** announcing that by 2005, eBooks would be a \$2.3 billion retail sales market. Asked to comment on that, I repeatedly said it was not going to happen for at least a decade, if ever. The much vaunted eBook phenomenon never did materialize. One of the misconceptions about **Questia** was/is that we are an eBook company. We are not. We are a database and software company. Our database consists of electronic versions of books, journals, magazine and newspapers. We are much more similar to **ProQuest** and **EBSCO** than we are **netLibrary**, for example. However, the key difference between us and everyone else is that our core market is individual students. We do not sell to institutions other than secondary schools and with secondary schools, we sell individual subscriptions to students. In contrast, the core market of almost every eBook company in the market these days is

still institutions. As such, we continue to feel that none of these companies are competitive with us. Our competition is the free Internet. Our challenge is to convince students to pay for our service instead of making do with what they can get for free on the Internet. We offer them a convenient place to go that has far more quality, credible content than is available elsewhere. We also offer them tools to personalize the content by highlighting and marking up the books as well as automatic footnote and bibliography features. For hundreds of thousands of students, **Questia** has been worth paying for.

As far as predicting the future. Well, to be honest, I am a bit less hasty to do that than I was in 2000. However, I continue to be a big believer in eLibraries — large collections of content available online. I think they will become an indispensable part of education over the next 20 years. There are a number of trends to point out here: first, electronic access to will be the primary method of accessing scholarly information for virtually all scholars within a decade. Indeed, it already is the primary mode for many today. Electronic access solves geographic issues, i.e., being near a physical copy of the title one needs to access, multiple-user issues, i.e., more than one person viewing at a time, and greatly increases the ability of a researcher to find what he or she is looking for, thereby giving them access to information they would not otherwise have and saving a tremendous amount of time in the process.

Second, online access to scholarly information is an integral part of the trend towards online education and distance education. The undergraduate population is diversifying beyond the traditional four-year, campus-dwelling student who has the luxury of using their campus library, to an undergraduate base that has many more geographic needs and requirements — students enrolled in distance learning programs; rural students without physical access to an adequate library; and older, community college students who work or have family obligations that prevent them from spending time in their campus library. In fact, the **University of Phoenix** is the nation's largest university with more than 170,000 people having earned their degree through the **University of Phoenix's** online program.

Third, the Internet has engendered a powerful trend toward personalization. Increasingly, young people have the expectation of having everything personalized for them. ELibraries such as **Questia** make that possible by enabling individuals to own and personalize their own library. Notes and highlights can be saved in various colors in each book

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and article for future reference and documents, "virtual bookshelves" and even previous term papers and bibliographies can be saved online and organized in various folders.

Fourth, with today's mobile phones, PDAs and numerous other gadgets, people increasingly expect complete mobility. ELibraries such as **Questia** enable a researcher to access their personalized copies of books and journals as well as old term papers and current work-in-progress from anywhere — from **Starbucks**, from their parents' home on Thanksgiving break, etc. Researchers will have and will expect complete mobility. For all these reasons and more, I believe that eLibraries will become an indispensable part of education over the next decade or two and I believe **Questia** is well positioned to take advantage of these trends.

ATG: Who owns Questia? How many customers do you have? What type of customer are they?

Questia is a privately owned company, with individual as well as institutional (venture capital) investors. Over the past four years we have had nearly 300,000 paid members use the **Questia** service. We enjoy subscribers in more than 195 countries around the world and 2,000 college and universities in the United States. The majority of our subscribers are students, ranging from secondary school to post-graduate. We do not sell to college or university libraries, public libraries or companies. This is because our agreements with publishers prevent us from doing so and always have. However, **Questia** does sell to secondary school institutions and we are having much success.

ATG: So are you still more interested in the individual market than in the library market?

Absolutely. By the library market I'm assuming you are referring to selling institutional site licenses to libraries at universities. Again, **Questia** is not pursuing that market as it would conflict with our publisher agreements. A number of our publishers have their own electronic products they sell to the institutional market. In addition, many of them fear that if every student at a college had access to **Questia** (i.e., their own copy of every book) then the libraries would buy fewer of their books. As such, we are focused on selling individual subscriptions. The reason why individual subscriptions are key is because a **Questia** subscription is built for the individual user. A personal workspace and bookshelf and other totally customized tools like personal citations and highlights are the features that make **Questia** unique and powerful. In 2002, the **Pew Internet & American Life Project** released a study finding that 73% of college students say they use the Internet more than the library for research, while only 9%

said they use the library more than the Internet. I'm sure the percentages are even more dramatic three years later. For good or ill, students bypass their library collections and begin their research on the Web. We're already there with a powerful service to help them get the same high quality content online that is available in their libraries offline.

ATG: Do you have a supply of eBooks?

I am proud to say that **Questia** is the largest online library of books on the Web today. We have the full-text of more than 56,000 books and nearly 1 million articles available online. Every individual around the world can gain unlimited access to this massive collection of over 20 million pages of previously published content for a month for only \$14.95. Our subscribers get access to the complete text of over 56,000 books and 1 million articles for the price of just **one book**. Moreover, they can use the library and tools anytime, anywhere. They can personalize the books and they can have their bibliographies automatically generated.

We add new content on a continual basis to enhance the research experience we provide our subscribers. Like every other library, we have a team of collection development librarians who select the titles we want to include in the collection — those that are most frequently consulted and used by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Then, a publisher relations representative contacts the appropriate publisher to negotiate a license to the titles.

Everyone who is concerned about the proliferation of content on the Internet from questionable sources and the inability of students and researchers to differentiate quality content from bogus content or propaganda should be interested in **Questia**. The editorial process, the peer-review process and the collection development process of libraries have been safeguards for generations. However, the Web, generally speaking, lacks them. We provide researchers on the Web with a place where they are guaranteed all the content is trusted, reliable, academically vetted, and scholarly from renowned publishers like **W.W. Norton** and **Cambridge University Press**. That's one of the compelling reasons why our subscribers belong to **Questia** — they know they can absolutely trust the **Questia** collection — because it is a "real library", not a Website with questionable content or links to other questionable sites. We are unique in this way. For a very large percentage of the


books in our library, **Questia** is the only place on the Internet that has the full-text copy. Your alternative, if you want one of these books, is to buy it on **Amazon.com** (for more money and wait a few days to receive it) or to visit a local library if they have a copy. For many of our subscribers in rural parts of this country and in the more than 195 countries in which we have had subscribers, there is no local library with this content.

ATG: Are you still working with a librarian advisory group? If so, who are they?

We do not have a formal librarian advisory group in place. However, the team that develops the **Questia** collection is a team of professional librarians that has decades of experience in collections management and did what they are doing now for **Questia** — building an academic collection — for brick-and-mortar libraries in previous lives.

ATG: Tell us about Troy Williams the person and what you do for fun. Family? Hobbies? Reading?

I have a passion for books and for education. Education made a huge impact on my life. I believe we can make an equally large impact by providing every child around the world with access to a vast, high quality academic library. I believe every child should have access to a library of scholarly materials regardless of whether they live in rural areas, foreign countries, or attend a community college with a sub-par research library. The Internet was created to democratize access to information and I believe **Questia** is part of the realization of that goal.

In my free time, I enjoy returning to my native New England (Mystic, Connecticut) and seeing my extended family. I am unmarried. I also enjoy researching the history of my New England ancestors, travel and am an avid reader. I generally read nonfiction books. I was a history major and the period of history I find most interesting is Colonial America between 1608 and 1763. There are 155 years of history there (and only 242 since) and yet, you almost never hear about this period of American history except for the Mayflower landing. It's a fascinating time in history and many of the seeds of much of what came afterward were planted during this period. I also subscribe to many magazines including *Foreign Affairs*, the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *National Geographic*, and *Architectural Digest*, among many others. Unfortunately, I rarely get through any of them given my constant business travel. 

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spring, and a Web-based version is also being developed.
http://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/press_releases/wiserPR05.html

And there's more from NLM — An ex-

tensive selection from the papers of one of the twentieth century's greatest scientists, **Francis Crick**, is now on NLM's **Profiles in Science Website**. The name of **Francis Crick** (1916-2004) is inextricably linked to the discovery of the double helix of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) in 1953, considered the most significant advance in biology since

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